

# Austin American-Statesman

50 CENTS ★ S

www.austin360.com

FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 24, 1999

## News Focus: Asian Americans in Politics

# Scandal-scarred, united for progress

■ Asian Americans work to emerge with identity, goals intact in 2000 races

By JAMES STERNGLD  
The New York Times

LOS ANGELES — In the relatively brief span of one presidential cycle, the role of Asian Americans in national politics appears to have changed in fundamental ways. After years as one of the most financially generous but underrepresented ethnic minorities in American politics, many Asian Americans are nursing deep wounds from what they regard as a string of insulting scandals. And this time, they say, things will be different.

There will be less interest in photo opportunities with the candidates, the groups say, and instead, a laserlike focus on getting more Asian Americans appointed to positions in Washington and to judgeships, as well as on bolstering government efforts to fight hate crimes and discrimination.

In addition, many Asian Americans say they are now taking political matters into their own hands by trying to transform the diverse Asian American groups into an electoral bloc where the population is most concentrated, in California, which is also the biggest prize in the presidential campaign.

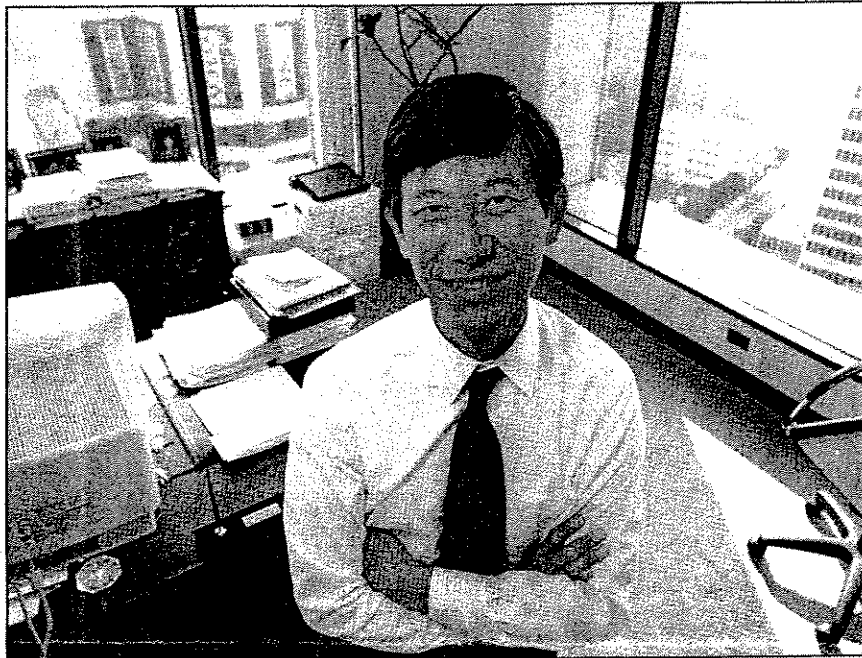
These efforts are backed by a great deal of emotion. No one doubts now that some election finance laws were broken by John Huang, a Chinese American who was at the center of the furor that erupted over illegal donations by Asians to President Clinton's 1996 re-election campaign, as well as two political newcomers who had ties to Clinton, Johnny Chung and Yah Lin Trie. All have pleaded guilty to charges involving improper political fundraising, and hundreds of thousands of dollars of donations they solicited had to be returned.

### Both parties responsible

Many Asian Americans feel that the fund-raising scandals put anyone with an Asian surname under a humiliating cloud of suspicion — with many perfectly legitimate donors receiving calls from the FBI. They hold both political parties partly responsible. The Republicans, they say, exploited racist fears for political gain, while the Democrats did little to openly defend the loyalty and integrity of Asian Americans.

Despite the pain, some Asian American leaders say the process was ultimately beneficial.

"I think this has been a great experience," said Thomas Chan, a founder of the newly formed Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Los Angeles. "Finally, there's something galvanizing the Asian American community. It's sad, but you have to have an event that shakes people to make them care. There was a paradigm shift. The focus now has got to be on practical things, like discrimination in jobs, glass ceilings at work, hate crimes and the appointment of Asian Americans



Edward Carson/New York Times

Thomas Chan, a founder of the Los Angeles-based Asian Pacific American Bar Association, says fund-raising improprieties involving Asian Americans and the Clinton administration have galvanized his community.

to important jobs in the next administration."

Despite the bitterness, no one is suggesting that the flow of Asian money into American politics will subside. But Warren Furutani, an aide to the speaker of the California state Assembly, and others said donors now will scrutinize candidates more closely.

Asian Americans contributed, quite legally, about \$10 million in each of the two previous presidential elections, by some estimates. But the money seems to have brought little open support from the political parties they had financed.

"I haven't completely come to grips with what I would call maltreatment by both parties," said Henry Tang, an investment banker and the chairman of the Committee of 100, an influential group of Chinese Americans in society and the arts. "People drew a linkage between Asians who were breaking the law and Asian Americans that was completely unfair. We felt helpless."

Those concerns were heightened earlier this year when a Chinese American scientist, Wen Ho Lee, was fired from the Los Alamos National Laboratory, where nuclear weapons are designed, on allegations he handed over nuclear secrets to China. He has not been charged with a crime and has denied any spying. Adding to the concerns, last month the former head of counterintelligence at Los Alamos, Robert Vrooman, said Lee was singled

out in large part because of his race, an accusation the Energy Department denied.

Matt Fong, a Republican who ran unsuccessfully against Sen. Barbara Boxer, D-Calif., for a U.S. Senate seat in 1998 and is now a fund-raiser for Gov. George W. Bush, said the attacks on Lee were a catalyst for the new strains of political thinking.

"There's a new mood of activism that hadn't existed before, and it has a different flavor," Fong said. "The different flavor is Wen Ho Lee. . . . What the community fears is the broad brush strokes, in which everyone of Chinese ancestry is suspected of spying for China."

### Loyalties abandoned

As a result, party loyalties are being abandoned and Asian Americans are looking to candidates who appear to offer benefits to their community. Jackson Tai, an investment banker and a lifelong Republican, said he had abandoned his old party because of what he felt was its eagerness to fan the flames of Asian racism. Now, he is raising money for former Sen. Bill Bradley.

Indeed, Bradley has been picking up significant support in some Asian American circles, in part because of what he is not: neither a Republican nor a member of the Clinton administration. "The biggest failure was the

administration's unwillingness to openly defend Asian Americans in the campaign financing scandal," said Dale Minami, who heads the Coalition of Asian Pacific Americans, based in San Francisco, and was a co-chairman of Clinton's northern California committee in 1992.

Though he did make a small number of appointments of Asian Americans, President Clinton is perceived as having not been vocal enough in supporting them during the scandals. And Vice President Gore has his own problems. He participated in a fund-raiser for Asian Americans at a Buddhist temple in Los Angeles in 1996 at which, it was later disclosed, many improper contributions were made.

Gore's staff returned many of the improper donations.

Now many Asian Americans are focused on the local, grass roots level and are working to develop a broader base for influence over the political process.

There are also efforts to get more Asian residents to become citizens and, importantly, to find and train potential Asian American candidates for public office.

"The community needs more facets and dimensions," said Don Nakanishi, director of the Asian American Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles. "One can't participate effectively with just one means, like giving money."